

USAF status report; Dangers of a CR; Hitting ISIS; Women in Special Ops

STATE OF THE AIR FORCE

The biggest threat to the Air Force is not necessarily foreign enemies—against which USAF is having great success—but chronic uncertainty about future funding, despite there being no letup in the service's very high operating tempo, USAF's top leaders said in August.

Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James and Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III, delivering what's become a twice-annual "State of the Air Force" briefing at the Pentagon, said USAF's capabilities have been in unusually great demand during the last year.

James ticked off a formidable list of operations and activities undertaken by the service, including humanitarian relief in Nepal, response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, and "ongoing commitments in Afghanistan" and to Pacific allies. "We've stood watch on the Korean Peninsula and we've reassured our allies in Europe in the face of a resurgent Russia," James added, all the while maintaining a "24/7" pace of attacks and surveillance operations over ISIS-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq.

She reserved much of her concern for the budget, however, and the possibility of a long-term continuing resolution in lieu of a National Defense Authorization Act by Congress.

"If we don't get a budget, it's going to affect lots and lots of programs," James said. "Under a CR, of course, there are no new starts." She also noted that Air Force end strength, slated to rise slightly in the 2016 budget, could not do so under a CR.

"We would be stuck in many, many ways," James acknowledged.

While "I believe" the Long-Range Strike Bomber program wouldn't be affected by a continuing resolution, James noted, "there might be as many as 50 programs, many of them smaller programs ... that would fall under that category of a 'new start,' which could not be done." That, in turn, would further retard Air Force modernization, postponed numerous times since the mid-1990s.

Welsh noted that quantity increases planned in certain programs—such as the KC-46 tanker and F-35 strike fighter—"would go away" under a CR. Multiyear programs, too, would be hit. In multiyear programs, the service negotiates a better deal for items by committing to buy a larger number, over a longer period of time than the typical two-year budget process of Congress. The efficiency of those programs would suffer.

In fact, James said, "a full-year CR would provide for our Air Force ... even less money than the sequestration-level budget would provide. So all around, that would be a bad deal, and we need to get the full-up appropriation and the full-up authorization passed at roughly the President's budget level." She called on Congress to invest in the Air Force, permanently lift the sequester, and pass a defense bill at the President's budget level. It would give "some reasonable degree of predictability, flexibility, and stability that we need in order to efficiently answer the nation's call."

PRECISELY ISIS

The fight against ISIS continues to be the Air Force's biggest effort, James reported. At the one-year anniversary of Operation Inherent Resolve, "our airmen have executed nearly 70 percent of the strikes against the [Islamic fundamentalist group]. We've flown more than 48,000 sorties ... and we've made good progress on our strategy of 'deny, disrupt,' ultimately looking towards 'defeat' of ISIS.

"Thanks to airpower," she said, "we've completely disrupted their tactics, techniques, and procedures. And in my opinion, had it not been for airpower, [ISIS] might well have overrun an even larger swath of Iraqi territory and made even greater gains in Syria than was the case."

James said, "We have pushed them back," claiming that the coalition fighting ISIS has halted the enemy's progress or "eliminated" its presence "in roughly 25 to 30 percent of populated areas in Iraq compared to a year ago" and has denied the group an "ability to operate freely in those areas." Airpower has "killed thousands of enemy fighters," destroyed command and control and logistics facilities, and attacked oil refineries controlled by ISIS, helping to cut off its sources of revenue.

And, James said, "we've also delivered important humanitarian relief to besieged populations" under assault by the group.

While doing all this, USAF has achieved an unprecedented level of precision, James said, minimizing "the loss of innocent life" even though it is fighting an enemy "that wraps itself around the civilian populations [and that thinks] nothing of killing anyone who is not them."

USAF pilots often return from anti-ISIS missions with unexpended ordnance if there's any question about whether hitting a target could put noncombatants in peril, said Welsh.

"We're not at war with Iraq," he said. "We don't want to drop bombs indiscriminately in Iraq and injure the citizens and destroy the property of the Iraqi people and Iraqi government," so USAF goes through "our collateral damage estimate to make sure that we're not going to hurt anyone other than the intended target." Sometimes aircraft take off with a planned objective, trying to hit something fleeting, and are able to shift to a new location en route—a process called "dynamic targeting." If the confirmation of the target doesn't come through before it's time to release weapons, though, "we bring the ordnance home. We try it again the next sortie."

"Coalition airmen have been remarkably disciplined about the way they have executed this, and we're very, very proud of their effort," Welsh stated.

IVAN, MEET THE RAPTOR

In late August, four F-22s from the 95th Fighter Squadron at Tyndall AFB, Fla., deployed to Spangdahlem AB, Germany, to help reassure allies and enhance NATO training

for air supremacy. It is the first European deployment for the F-22.

The deployment will “demonstrate our commitments to [the] security and stability of Europe,” James said. Russia’s “activity in ... Ukraine continues to be of great concern to us,” she said, and “our approach to Russia needs to be strong and ... balanced.”

The F-22 move “is just a continuation of deploying it everywhere we can to train with our partners,” Welsh added. It was to be sent “into facilities that we would potentially use in a conflict in Europe, ... like the bases where we do aviation detachments [and] ... air policing missions,” including the Baltic states that border Russia. Welsh said USAF wanted to accomplish some air-to-air training with NATO allies who fly the Eurofighter Typhoon, and practice operating the F-22 “side by side with them ... in multiple-type [aircraft] scenarios.”

Closer to home, Welsh said he expects the new F-35 fighter will achieve initial operational capability at Hill AFB, Utah, next year. Though the service has openly worried that it won’t have enough maintainers available to flesh out F-35 squadrons unless the A-10 retires (as USAF has requested but Congress has so far refused), Welsh said, “We have enough airmen identified and in training to make the IOC date,” slated for August 2016. “The IOC date has never been a concern for the maintenance side of the house. It’s full operational capability that’s the problem,” he said.

“Unless we either get a plus-up of our topline of people in the Air Force or we divest some other platform to take maintenance folks from, we don’t have enough people” for a fully manned F-35 maintenance force, said Welsh.

James insisted that “we have to be able to move on in terms of our capability and to modernize the Air Force.” If there were “billions and billions and billions of additional dollars” available, she said, “we would love to [keep] the A-10. We would love to have thousands of additional airmen. ... But in a budget-constrained environment, this is one of the tough choices that we had to make for the sake of moving forward and modernizing.”

Welsh also said he considered an upcoming Pentagon test pitting the F-35 against the A-10 in a close air support evaluation “a silly exercise.” The F-35 will be able to perform CAS in a densely defended area, something the A-10 can’t do, he insisted. At the same time, the F-35 won’t be able to deliver the sheer firepower of the A-10 in an uncontested airspace. They’re not competitors.

Welsh said, “Eventually, I would ... like to have a capability that replaces the A-10” in the “low-threat” environment “in an even better way than the A-10.” The Air Force “should be trying to get better,” he said. “I’m worried about future CAS, not past CAS.”

SEVEN REMAIN

Although there are still “seven career specialties,” mostly in special operations, that are still off-limits to female airmen, USAF has been working to try to open all its career paths to women, James said.

“We ... are the most open ... of all the services” to women doing the most kinds of jobs, James said, and “we have been working on establishing gender-neutral and operationally and occupationally relevant standards” for all specialties. “Once we have them in place, it certainly would be my anticipation” that even those last seven billets would be open to all, she said.

Though she and Welsh have not yet “received recommendations from the field,” regarding those standards, James said USAF has until the beginning of this month to forward a report to the Secretary of Defense on how it will proceed.

The standards are “hard,” she said, and “we don’t want to lower standards.”

NOT EVEN REMOTELY THERE YET

The Air Force has been struggling with the demands on its remotely piloted aircraft career field for several years. It’s gotten some temporary relief from fielding as many RPA combat air patrols by way of a Defense Department move shifting some of the burden to the other services. During the respite, USAF will increase its manning levels and build a greater throughput at RPA operator school, Welsh said.

Among the methods USAF is employing to relieve pressure on its RPA cadre is to have contractors operate some of the Air Force’s RPAs, Welsh said, quickly noting that this is “not a new concept.”

“It does not require new approvals,” he said of the plan. “We don’t anticipate at all that [contractors] would be involved in ... [direct] targeting ... forces on the ground.” Rather, the contractors would be performing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions “for the near term until we can get our training pipeline mature enough that it can sustain the load over time.” Stoppgap measures to meet USAF’s RPA demands so far have included new bonuses to keep experienced RPA operators in uniform and involuntary extensions of some manned aircraft pilots temporarily assigned to RPA duties.

Welsh vigorously argued, however, that now is not the time to revisit the debate over whether USAF should be the Pentagon’s executive agent in charge of coordinating and planning the RPA efforts of all the services.

“I don’t think the ... debate would be helpful or really particularly useful right now,” Welsh said. The last time the issue came up, in 2008, it was “contentious” and “divisive” and settled nothing, he said.

“I don’t think the debate would be much different right now than it was then,” he observed, suggesting that he doesn’t think the outcome would be any different either.

“We have worked very closely together as uniformed services to put an architecture in place” that coordinates the training of analysts and specialists from different services “so that we can operate in a joint way on a battlefield, and we’ve been doing it remarkably well for the last 12 years or so,” Welsh said. “I think we’ve made some tremendous progress,” he said, but he sees little benefit to reopening the old intraservice fault lines.

“There’s enough going on. That’s my personal opinion,” he said.

SPACE LINES OF CONTROL

The Air Force is the executive agent for space, however, and Welsh said USAF is working with other services and defense and national security agencies to develop new ways to characterize and respond to acts of war that take place in space.

“We are trying to help—through Air Force Space Command—put together the command and control architecture that you would use to bring together the greater Intelligence Community and the greater space community to be able to respond appropriately, as a nation, if space became a battlespace,” Welsh said. Issues being discussed include: “How do you keep systems resilient? How do you keep systems operating? How do you develop redundancy? How do you develop alternative paths for data, communications, intelligence, etc.?” Those questions have to be answered “not just as a single service or even as a single warfighting command” but as a community, he said.

“All the pieces are there,” Welsh asserted. “We just have to figure out how to fit them together and make sure the authorities are clear, and that’s going to be the difficult part of this.” ★